

Idolatry in the Evangelical Camp Pictures of “Christ” or the Glory of God?

By J. Virgil Dunbar & Richard Bennett

It seems as if most denominations use Warner Sallman’s “Head of Christ” painting, or images like it. These pictures obviously are acceptable images of “Christ” for modern Christians. But in the light of Scripture, can they really be excluded from falling under the Second Commandment?

1. Pictures of “Christ” are idols, not by popular definition, but by dictionary and Bible definitions.

Nowadays, on a popular level, the word “idol” means only an image of a false god, or a heathen deity, the word “idol” has a more basic meaning also. However in Bible and theology dictionaries the word “idol” means “the worship of Jehovah by means of images”¹, “the worship of Jehovah under image or symbol.”² “**Idolatry, strictly speaking, denotes the worship of deity in a visible form**, whether the images to which the homage is paid are symbolical representations of the true God or of the false divinities which have been made the objects of worship in His stead.”³ *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology* says, “**Because God was unseen and transcendent, men set up idols as a materialistic expression of Him.** Soon the created thing was worshiped as a god instead of the Creator.”⁴

The idolatry of the golden calf

Everybody knows that the golden calf of Exodus 32 was an idol, but most people do not realize that it was made intentionally to represent God, “Elohim” who had brought the people up out of Egypt. Exodus 32:4-5 states “*And he [Aaron] received them at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, after he had made it a molten calf: and they said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. And when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation, and said, **Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD.***” In I Kings 12:28, Jeroboam, fearing that the people would return to the house of David, devised a plan: “*Whereupon the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold, and said unto them [the people], It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem: behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.*” Both passages of Scripture make it clear that the people who made and used those images used them as images of the LORD God, the God who delivered Israel from Egypt. Even though our English translations call the images “gods” with a small “g”, the Hebrew word used, “Elohim”, is the same word that is elsewhere translated as God (e.g. Genesis 1:1). The Bible will not give God’s name to any image. The context shows that the people intended to use these images to represent the “Elohim” who delivered them from Egypt. Every attempt to make a similitude of God--representing Him in some materialistic form--is basically a practice of the same sin as making the golden calf.

¹ *Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, p. 368.

² *Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, p. 512.

³ *Peloubet’s Bible Dictionary*, F. N. Peloubet & Alice D Adams, Eds. (Philadelphia, PA: The John C. Winston Co., 1925) p. 271.

⁴ *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, “Gods” (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1960) p. 248.

The issue at stake in the making of idols is clearly presented in Deuteronomy 4:12-13, 15, *“And the LORD spake unto you out of the midst of the fire: ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice. And he declared unto you his covenant, which he commanded of you to perform, even ten commandments;... Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of similitude on the day that the LORD spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire: lest ye corrupt yourselves, and make you a graven image, the similitude of any figure...”*

2 Pictures presume to represent God

Acceptance of pictures as professedly to representing God has deceived believers. They think that our deity pictures are not idols, especially since they are not three-dimensional and, therefore, it cannot be idolatrous to use such pictures. But the definition from the Bible says very simply “no similitude”.

What is at stake is God’s glory and the authority of His written word! If we hold to imagery and visualization of the character of God, then we have given up the very principle of the Bible only being the authority. We have given up the very basis of truth, negating the very foundation on which we stand. Rather than an issue of preference or feeling, the issue is most serious for in the Bible, idolatry is clearly spoken of as something God hates. Idolatry has always been the Achilles’ heel by which the people of God have been wounded and brought down. In our own day, men desire to do it “my way”--to give in to the humanistic way of portraying God in a manner that He has commanded He is not to be portrayed.

Christ is the all Holy God in His humanity. In His earthly days, His humanity contained the fullness of His divinity, but that humanity is now no longer on earth. We know Him no longer after the flesh, as the Scripture says, rather we know Him now in spirit and in truth, for we know spiritual things spiritually⁵ and it is in God’s light that we see light.⁶ The Word of God is written now into the heart of the believer. His Word is crystal clear on the Second Commandment; the clarion call is as Paul says in I Corinthians 4:6, *“...not to think beyond what is written...”*

The Gospel is at stake, for the Scripture states that *“Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God.”*⁷ The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation as it is written, read, and spoken one to another. The power of the Word is that it is propositional truth. Rather than subjective and tacit, *“The word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”*⁸ Continually, in the Old and New Testament, there is the commandment of God and the warning of God not to depict Him in a visual way. In olden times in Israel people deviated from the written word and then there would come a famine in the land. For example, in Amos 8:11-12, *“Behold the days are coming says the Lord God and I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord...”* Thus in our day, if young children are given pictures of “Christ”, or if they see videos of “Christ”, then in their hearts there is a famine for the written word. There is no desire or longing to know God because they think they have known Him through the form of images, the very thing that God forbids in His Word.

⁵ I Corinthians 2:12-16.

⁶ Psalm 36:9.

⁷ Romans 10:17.

⁸ Hebrews 4:12.

Children brought up to see “Christ” rather than to meditate on the God given words of Him who is the brightness of God’s glory and the express image of His person.⁹ So quite easily they fail when it comes to understanding that they are dead in trespasses and sin¹⁰ and therefore in need of “*being justified freely by His grace*” (Romans 3:24). The one whom they see is so easy to look upon and the message “to receive Him into their hearts” is such an easy action, it is one quick ritual. They have been sold idolatry while failing to be taught the Gospel verse by verse, and doctrine by doctrine, that salvation is freely given to the sinner by God’s grace alone through faith alone and to God alone be the glory. To furnish children (or anyone for that matter) with pictures and videos of “Jesus” is to withhold the birthright and to serve them a mess of pottage instead. “*Woe to those who cause these little ones to stumble...*”

3. These pictures break God’s law and defile God’s grace.

The present day Bible believing church seems ignorant of the meaning of the Second Commandment which forbids using images to represent God. Exodus 20:4-6 states, “*Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.*”

God’s Law is Christological: that is, it points to Christ. God’s Law is eternal and His grace writes it on the believer’s heart. In the old covenant, the Law was written on tables of stone. In the grace of the new covenant, the Law is written on the hearts and in the minds of God’s covenant people.

While we blame the Supreme Court for not allowing the Ten Commandments to be posted on schoolroom walls, we in the church break this commandment whenever we use a picture to represent Christ. We teach our children to break the Ten Commandments when we give them pictures to represent Christ. Can we legitimately expect Holy God to refrain from applying Exodus 20:5 to our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren?

4. The picture as a mediator opens the door for pantheism.

The picture is a part of creation. The creation is not God. To picture a created man, and to label that picture with the name of the Creator is to confuse the Creator with the creation. Romans 1:21 states the cause of such confusion is “*Because that when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.*” The regression continues, “*Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, And changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things.*” (Vv. 22-23) Isaiah 40:18 states the problem, “*To whom then will ye liken God? or what likeness will ye compare unto Him?*” Romans 12:2 states the Scriptural answer to this problem unequivocally, “*And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God.*”

Any picture of “God” makes the picture itself into a mediator because the viewer thinks Gnostically that he knows God, at least in some measure, by seeing the picture. In this Gnostic-type knowledge of Christ, the viewer is allowed to go on silently thinking his own thoughts unhindered by the transforming power of God’s Word; thus the viewer’s mind continues to be

⁹ Hebrews 1:3.

¹⁰ Ephesians 2:1.

conformed to the world by the limits of the created image and by his own subjectivity. In this Gnostic type knowledge of Christ, pictures of “Jesus” silently address the physical senses of the viewers without presenting His propositional truth objectively and explicitly to their minds. Rather, the viewer of a picture attaches his own subjective interpretation to whatever the picture presents to him. Thus the artist and the viewer blend God and His creation into a single continuum in the picture.

Since these pictures confuse and obscure the distinction between God and His created world Delightful as they may be to the senses, nevertheless they have presented a deception. The pictures confirm to the pantheist that Jesus is merely part of their pantheon. Similarly, to the natural man puffed by his own darkened imaginations, these pictures confirm that the Word of God is of no interest to himself. The pictures lay the foundation for the pantheistic concepts of “God” in the church. No wonder the western church is now being ravaged by eastern cults. No wonder that such peoples, as Hindus love pictures of “Christ” as much as they do those of Lhatchme. Yet God has ordained the means by which people, old and young shall be saved and taught. It is clearly spelled out in Romans 10:14-15,

“How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!”

5. Pictures of “Jesus” corrupt true worship of Christ.

People who use pictures of “Christ” deny that they worship the pictures, but rather that the pictures help them to worship Christ. This is essentially justifying the use of a medium, a practice well established in the Roman Catholic Church. In rationalizing her setting aside of the Second Commandment, the RCC states clearly and heretically, “...the honor rendered to an image passes to its prototype, and whoever venerates an image venerates the person portrayed in it.”¹¹ While in fact the pictures do help to form a concept of “Christ” for those who use them in worship, the basis of their worship is not the written word of God but rather becomes the visual depiction before them. Rather than drink from the fountain of living water, they have turned for their knowledge of God to broken cisterns, which they have hewn out with their own hands.

Pictures of Christ corrupt the meanings of many Biblical words. The definition of idolatry is changed so that the category will exclude pictures of “Christ”, pictures of the Father, and representations of the Holy Spirit. To so redefine idolatry is an attempt, however sincerely undertaken, to corrupt what man is to believe concerning God as given to us through the Scriptures. The pictures eventually impact and change the meaning of “salvation” and the “church”. First, we accept the false pictures to “know” Christ (Gnosticism again). These Gnostic pictures serve as mediators for knowing Christ. Using the pictures serves as mediators for knowing Christ. Using the pictures rituals are developed. The representative pictures need a special priesthood to officiate in the development and performance of a suitable liturgy. The Roman Catholic Mass is a classical example of such go-between priesthood. In the Mass, the highest point of Rome's liturgy she claims “worship which is due to the true God” for the Communion bread.¹² All this, in Roman Catholicism is claimed to be done in His name. The end result is that Christ is replaced, as people look to the image. Thus evangelical world a similar reasoning tries to justify the false pictures of Christ. These pictures corrupt evangelism, the

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1994) #2132.

¹² Vatican Council II Documents, No. 9, *Eucharisticum Mysterium*, Vol. I, Sec. 3, p. 104.

Christian education, and true worship of the Church. The Bible accepts no man-made picture as being a picture of Christ. Neither should we.

6. The Bible is sufficient.

In the sixteenth century when the great Reformers preached, there was a return to Biblical truth. The Bible was seen to be the ultimate authority, the words of the Bible were all sufficient to show the transcendent character and person of God, Who He is, that He is Spirit, infinite, eternal, unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.

The words of the Bible and the power of God unto salvation in the Gospel message were paramount. Until quite recently, this was still the case in the evangelical world. There were no pictures of “Christ”, no giving in to the worldly ways of mankind on this issue, but rather the truth of God was explained in God’s way, in written words of propositional truth. The punishment of idolatry is severe, as the Second Commandment and the Old Testament make clear. The temptation to visualize Christ, the Father, or the Holy Spirit must be repented of, for God is holy and the Bible is sufficient. ***“And we know that the son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know Him that is true, and we are in Him that is true, even in His son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols.”*** (I John 5:20-21)

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